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ABSTRACT

Relationships with family members have been shown to be important in old age, both with adult children and with elderly siblings. Through shared memories such relationships may help with the life review (a process in which there is a detailed reconsideration and evaluation of personal experiences throughout life). To compare the differences in patterns of reminiscence between elderly siblings, and between elderly adults and their children, 127 parent-child and 93 sibling relationships were studied using in-home interviews. Analyses of results confirmed that reminiscence about old times was significantly greater in sibling relationships. In parent-child communication, other family members were the most frequent topic of discussion, followed by the parent's health. Results also showed that sibling reminiscence was greater, the fewer the number of living siblings remaining in the family. The findings suggest that reminiscence can be used to clarify and validate past events, resolve conflict, and diminish rivalry. (JAC)

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Abstract

Similarities and Contrasts in Quality of Child and Sibling Relationships with Elderly

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While relationships with adult childre and with siblings have both been shown to be important in old age, it was hypothesized that reminiscence about old times plays an important role in sibling relationships in old age. Data regarding communication about various topics were obtained for 127 parent-child and 93 sibling relationships. Frequency of communication about old times was significantly greater ($p < .05$) between siblings, while parent-child communication was greater for other topics. Such reminiscence was greater, the fewer the number of living siblings remaining in the family. The function of shared reminiscence between elderly siblings in the life review task is discussed.

Key words: reminiscence
life review
communication
living siblings
shared memories
integrity vs. depair

Similarities and Contrasts in Quality of Child and Sibling Relationships with Elderly[1]

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Relationships with family members have been shown to be important in old age, both with adult children and with elderly siblings. Affectional closeness, companionship, and willingness to give help when needed are among the typical functions of such relationships. Siblings have been found to improve morale among older people (Cumming & Henry, 1961), contribute to their sense of efficacy and control (Cicirelli, 1980), contribute to emotional security, and to stimulate and challenge (Cicirelli, 1977). Various interview studies have reported that siblings are generally ready to assist in time of trouble, although their help is usually called for only when adult children are absent (Allan, 1977; Cicirelli, 1979; Cumming & Schneider, 1961). There are instances where a sibling takes over complete care of an older person in need (e.g., Townsend, 1957); in general, however, sibling help is relatively low except in the area of psychological support (Cicirelli, 1979). Such psychological support includes such things as serving as a confidante, giving advice, aiding in decision making, cheering up the elderly person's spirits, and generally boosting morale.

Psychological support is also a major part of adult children's helping relationship to elderly parents (Cicirelli, 1981). However, little is known about whether the relationship with siblings differs

in quality as well as in quantity from the relationship with adult children. One aspect of the sibling relationship which differs from the parent-child relationship is that they interact as peers, sharing a life-long common history. Thus they should be better able to understand and share each other's interests, concerns, health worries, and problems of aging. They can also share memories from their early experiences together.

The family system in adulthood and later life may be looked upon as composed of overlapping nuclear family systems, with the middle-aged adult taking the role of parent in the nuclear family which he or she heads and taking the role of child in the nuclear family or origin. Looking at the family in another way, the individual enters the system as an infant. As the individual grows older, the family system and the individual's roles within that system change. Beginning in the role of child in the family or origin, the individual "rises" in the system to assume the roles of spouse and then parent in the family or procreation, and finally the roles of grandparent and possibly great-grandparent. At the same time, certain roles are relinquished with the passage of time. When grandparents die, the role of grandchild is no longer available, and when elderly parents die, the role of adult child is given up. The role of sibling remains the same throughout life of a sibling pair, once it has been defined in the family of origin. However, there are changes in the kinship structure over time which affect the system of which the sibling relationship is part. Over the years, the

individual's family of procreation expands, while the family of origin gradually disintegrates as its members die. As the family of origin erodes, only fragments of the nuclear family system remain in the form of dyadic relationships (as between two siblings, or between a widowed parent and a child). The parts continue to remain after the whole is gone, but the whole endures in the parts as memories within individuals.

The life review (Butler, 1963) is a process which goes on in the latter portion of life, in which there is a detailed reconsideration and evaluation of personal experiences throughout life. This assessment of one's contributions and accomplishments is, in most cases, a normal process of identity consolidation and personality integration. The re-evaluation of past events and experiences permits the resolution of previously unresolved conflicts and may lead to a more positive self-concept. Such reminiscence may thus promote better adjustment in old age (Havighurst & Glasser, 1972). On the other hand, the process of making an honest appraisal of one's self worth and a coming to a realistic awareness of present vulnerability and mortality can also lead to a sense of bitterness, regret, and despair (Boylin, Gordon, & Nehrke, 1976). In this sense, the process of reminiscence or life review may be viewed as a task of later life contributing to the resolution of Erikson's (1968) integrity versus despair crisis.

Precisely because siblings share so many memories over their entire lives, they can serve as interested listeners as well as

provide corrective feedback to each other in the life review process. Such shared reminiscence between siblings also has been observed to maintain the bonds of closness between siblings, as they evoke the closeness and warmth of early life in the nuclear family scene together (Ross, Dalton, & Milgram, 1981; Ross & Milgram, 1982). Indeed, according to Ross and Milgram, the closeness to the whole family may be greater than the closeness to any particular sibling. Thus communication between siblings and shared reminiscences appears to serve the function of reintegrating and reaffirming the identity of the original family structure.

It is hypothesized, therefore, that reminiscence about earlier life would play a larger role in the communication between elderly siblings than in the communication between elderly parents and adult children. If mere reminiscence as part of the life review process were all that was involved, one would expect it to occur to the same degree regardless of the co-participant in the communication. However, if siblings do play a unique role in reminiscence due to their shared recollections of childhood family life, then one would expect more reminiscence in communication between siblings than between parents and children. Further, it is hypothesized that there is a relationship between the loss of members of the nuclear family of origin and the amount of reminiscing with remaining siblings. As the number of living siblings from the family or origin decreases, that family is perceived to have eroded to only a few siblings or a single sibling dyad. The whole family endures only as memories within

the few remaining individuals of the family. Evoking early family memories through reminiscence of old times should play a larger role in the communication between siblings the smaller the number of living siblings remaining from the family or origin. The present study investigated these hypotheses by comparing the relationships between elderly siblings with the relationships between elderly parents and their adult children.

Method

Sample. The sample of elderly persons with living siblings was drawn from the sample of those persons over 60 years of age obtained for an earlier study (Cicirelli, 1979). This sample was obtained by canvassing randomly selected blocks of a small midwestern city to identify 537 elderly persons; of these, 300 completed interviews were obtained for a 57% completion rate. Only 235 of the 300 elderly so obtained had living siblings; a random sample of 50 of the 235 was interviewed in depth regarding their relationships with a total of 93 living siblings.

The parent-child sample was drawn from the same data base as the sample of elderly with siblings. It consisted of 148 adult children with living elderly mothers. Of these, data were obtained from 127 regarding their communication with their mothers. Data regarding the relationship with mothers were selected because the relationship with mothers is typically a closer one than the relationship with fathers (Troll, 1971), and because it represented a larger sample than that available for fathers.

The elderly individuals involved in the two samples were quite similar in general characteristics, as might be expected. Mean age for the sibling group was 75.1 years and for the parent-child group was 74.1 years. Some 44% of each group was widowed. Educational level on the 7-point Hollingshead scale was 3.54 for the sibling group and 3.36 for the parent-child group, which represented an educational attainment of some high school training. All were white and primarily of northern European background. Mean age of the adult children was 45.9 years.

Each person was interviewed individually in his or her own home by a trained graduate student interviewer; three women and two men carried out the interviews. Total interview time for the parent-child interviews was about 90 minutes, while total interview time for the sibling interviews was 112 minutes for general kin data and an additional 30 minutes for the in-depth sibling data.

Measures. Demographic data were obtained regarding age, sex, number of living siblings, sibling age, sibling sex, educational level, and so on. Adams' (1968) measure of closeness of feeling was adapted as a four-point rating item for the study.

Nine questionnaire items assessed sibling or parent-child communication in regard to various topics. The interviewee was asked to indicate the extent to which each topic was talked about when the interviewee and the sibling (or the interviewee and parent) got together, using a five-point scale ranging from "not at all"

to "almost every time." The nine topics were: other family members, health of the elderly person, old times, local news and events, religion, routine job or household matters, national and world events, problems of old age, and hobbies or special interests. The degree to which communication regarding old times occurred was taken as a measure of reminiscence. Of the nine topics, it was expected that siblings, as age peers, would communicate to a greater degree on topics on health, old times, religion, and problems of old age than would parents and children.

Two sets of analyses were carried out. The first involved the relationship of each elderly person interviewed with the oldest living sibling in the family, while the second included data on sibling relationships with a total of 93 sibling relationships. Results from the two analyses were closely similar. Those involving the larger sample size are reported here, to take advantage of the greater statistical power.

Results

Both the parent-child and the sibling relationships were reported to be quite close by the interviewees. The mean for the adult child's feelings of closeness to the elderly parent was 3.39 (*SD* = 0.78), while the mean for the elderly individual's closeness to siblings was 3.11 (*SD* = 0.90). Both represent a degree of closeness which is between feeling "close" and "extremely close." Although the difference between the two means is small, parent-child closeness was significantly greater than sibling closeness, t (218) = 2.22,

$p < .05$.

Table 1 presents mean values for the extent of communication in regard to the various topics for the parent-child relationship and for the sibling relationship. The most frequently discussed topics in communications between siblings were other family members ($M = 3.76$) and old times ($M = 3.72$). Some 35% discussed other family members with their siblings almost every time they saw each other, and 37% discussed old times that often. In parent-child communications, other family members was the most frequently discussed topic ($M = 3.88$), followed by the parent's health ($M = 3.82$). Some 31% of adult children and their parents discussed other family members almost every time they saw each other, and 30% discussed the parent's health that often.

Insert Table 1 about here

The results of t-tests for the differences between means for sibling and parent-child communication on the various topics are also presented in Table 1. Eight of the nine topics were discussed more frequently by parent-child dyads than by siblings; only old times were discussed more frequently by elderly siblings. Five of the nine differences were statistically significant at the .05 level: health of the elderly person, old times, local news and events, routine job or household matters, and problems of old age.

Four topics were predicted to more frequently discussed by

sibling dyads, due to their greater rapport as age peers: old times, health, religion, and problems of old age. Of these, only the prediction in the case of old times was supported. Health and problems of old age were discussed more frequently by parent-child dyads than by siblings, while there was no signficant difference on the topic of religion. Reminiscences of old times thus appears to play a unique role in the communication between siblings.

It was also hypothesized that the amount of reminiscence about old times would be greater as the number of living siblings remaining in the family or origin decreased. This was tested by examining the correlation between number of living siblings and frequency with which old times were discussed by siblings. This correlation (r = .27), was weak but statistically significant at the .01 level; the correlation remained significant (r = .25) when the effects of age, educational level, and geographic distance between siblings were partialled out. Reminiscence about old times did not depend on the sex of the siblings involved, on the geographic distance between them, or on the feelings of closeness to the sibling.

Discussion

The study provided support to the thesis that reminiscence about old times is an important function of sibling relationships in old age. Not only was such reminiscence one of the two most frequent topics of communication between sibling dyads, it was significantly more frequent between elderly siblings than between

adult children and elderly parents. It is clear that if reminiscence as a form of life review is characteristic of the elderly individual, one might expect to find it as often in communications with one family member as with another. However, it's more frequent occurrence between siblings indicates that such shared reminiscence plays a unique role for them.

As the remaining members of their families of origin, siblings can use reminiscences of old times together to validate and clarify events and relationships that took place in childhood or young adulthood. Frequently, no other living person has access to this information or can view it from the same perspective. The fact that such sibling reminiscence did not depend on the closeness of feelings between them suggests that it is the sibling relationship itself that is important. Ross and Milgram (1982) observed that sharing recollections of happy childhood experiences appeared to be a source of comfort and pride, contributing to a sense of integrity that life had been lived in harmony with the family. On the other hand, not being able to do it appeared to be related to discomfort and despair. In this sense, shared sibling reminiscence may be an important way of approaching Erikson's last developmental task (1968), the crisis of integrity versus despair.

To such an end, siblings appear to resolve conflict with each other and to diminish long-standing rivalry as they approach old age, or they make an attempt to do so (Allan, 1977; Cicirelli, 1980, 1982; Ross, Dalton, & Milgram, 1981; Ross & Milgram, 1982).

Again, shared reminiscence may be important in accomplishing such ends as events surrounding early conflicts are examined and placed in a more mature perspective.

The study also provided some support for the hypothesis that shared sibling reminiscence provided a means of evoking the eroding family of origin which became more important the smaller the remnant of the family that remained. The correlation was weak but in the predicted direction. The fewer siblings that remain, the more there may be a sense of their own approaching mortality and perhaps a greater sense of urgency in reviewing life events in the family of origin. Elderly subjects of the study were asked about how they would feel if they were the last remaining member of their sibling group. Many responses were poignant and touched on extreme feelings of loss, the great loneliness of being the "last leaf on the tree," and no longer having someone to share things with. Such statements, made in spite of the fact that most of these elderly people headed large and expanding families of procreation, underscores the importance of their identification with the family of origin.

The present study suggests that the elderly may not be generally preoccupied with memories of the past, but that such memories may be quite specific to particular tasks and relationships with certain people. Thus, the findings are not necessarily at odds with the failure to find an association between age and thoughts or daydreams about the past (Cameron, 1972; Giambra, 1977). Most

elderly do not fit the stereotype of living in the past; rather, they appear to evoke it to fulfill certain needs.

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Table 1

Summary of t-tests for Differences in Means of Frequencies of Communication on Various Topics by Parent-child and Sibling Dyads

	Sibling		Parent-child		
Communication Topic	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	t
Other family members	3.76	1.19	3.88	1.10	-0.82
Health	2.82	1.09	3.82	1.09	-6.71*
Old times	3.72	1.29	3.06	0.98	4.12*
Local news and events	2.76	1.24	3.22	1.07	-2.86*
Religion	2.49	1.25	2.66	0.99	-1.08
Job, household matters	2.81	1.26	3.31	1.15	-3.01*
National, world events	2.75	1.30	2.96	1.02	-1.29
Problems of old age	2.30	1.19	2.84	1.06	-3.46*
Hobbies, special interests	2.52	1.18	2.80	1.03	-1.83

*Significant at the .05 level.

Footnotes

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